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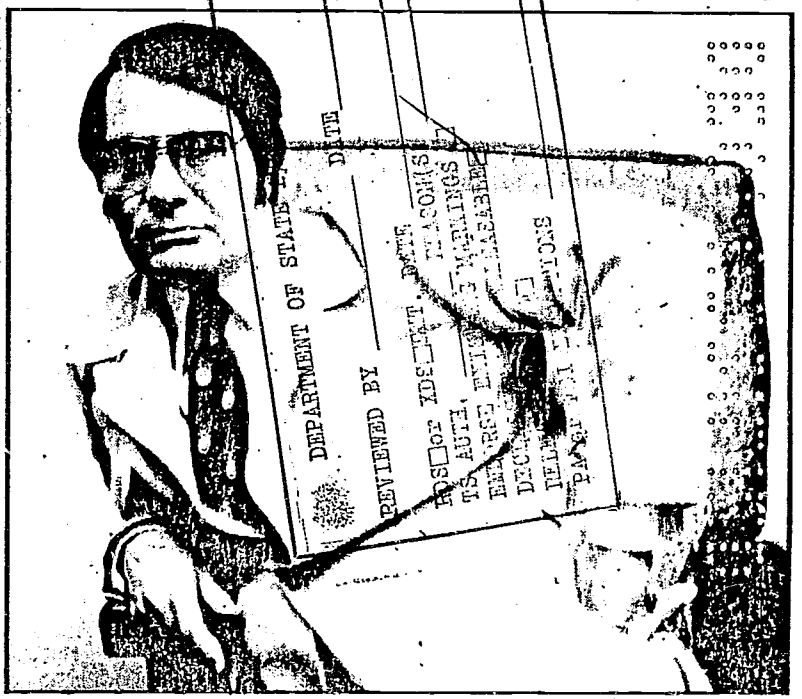
By Bob Levering

The biggest religion story in the Bay Area these days isn't the deprogramming of the Moonies, women's moves on the priesthood in Catholic and Episcopal congregations, or even the latest on Jerry Brown's gurus.

Instead, it's the phenomenon of Peoples Temple, a church that has been in San Francisco less than five years but has already become the largest single Protestant congregation in the state (more than 20,000 members), participating in activities as diverse as supporting the tenants at the International Hotel (more than 3,000 church members turned out for a demonstration last January) and publishing the Bay Area's largest circulation newspaper, the monthly Peoples Forum (they distribute between 600,000 and 1,000,000 copies to every neighborhood in San Francisco and throughout the East Bay, the Peninsula and Marin County).

More: This church, affiliated with the Disciples of Christ—a conventional Protestant denomination that has boasted Lyndon Johnson among its



PHOTOS BY JANET FRIES

Jim Jones: "I have a lot of guilt—guilt to know my taxes go to the Shah of Iran and Chile. Some people don't feel guilty at all about these things, and I sure don't want to end up like them."

1.4 million members—also has a free meals program that surpasses even St. Anthony's Dining Room in number of meals served daily (1,400 to St. Anthony's 1,200) and a 27,000-acre ranch in Guyana where members grow cassava and 170 other crops. It has given away money to the families of slain policemen. It conducts a massive human service program including a drug rehabilitation project, its own medical and legal clinics, a home for mentally disabled children and four nursing homes in Mendocino.

The leader of this rather unusual church is the Rev. Jim Jones, who was recently appointed to the SF Housing Commission by Mayor Moscone—and shortly thereafter was meeting with Huey Newton in Cuba. A quick look at a recent issue of Peoples Forum indicates the wide variety of concerns his church addresses: there's a lead story on "Laura Allende: Woman of Courage," about a recent visit to the church by the slain Chilean president's sister; an "Open letter to local Nazis," condemning these "abominable racists"; articles on aging, cancer and teenage suicide; a condemnation of the terrorist attack on Sup. Dianne Feinstein's home; and a long editorial about the link between unemployment and crime, saying people must "face up to some of the vicious inequities and injustices in our social order."

One article in Peoples Forum, though, best sums up what may be the key to understanding the Peoples Temple phenomenon. Entitled "Youth to the rescue," it describes how a Peoples Temple member had rushed into a burning apartment and helped rescue a woman and her two small children. It quotes the young rescuer, Daniel Kopplin, as giving credit for his daring effort to the philosophy he has been taught in his church: "When I felt the urge to go in, I knew I should go. My Pastor [Jones] has taught that there's usually a good reason for this kind of feeling, so I was sure I would make it." The article then cited a similar incident that involved three Peoples Temple youths last spring, and concludes, "Why have these youths risked their lives for people they did not even know? As Supervisor Feinstein observed, apathy and lack of concern for others lie at the root of our society's problems. Rev. Jones, however, has instilled in his members a willingness to get involved where human life is at stake."

As corny as that story sounds, it fairly accurately sums up the sort of attitude Jones has generated among the church's membership. It's as if he has found a way of translating and dramatizing the old Christian message that serving one's fellow human beings is an end in itself and has somehow produced a fast-growing community of politically aware and very spirited do-gooders.

A church service at Peoples Temple, where this sort of feeling is instilled, is hard to forget. The one I attended took place on a Saturday night at the church, 1859 Geary Street, in the heart of SF's Fillmore district, a mostly black ghetto. Peoples Temple acquired the building, a former youth center, in mid-1972 and uses it as the headquarters for its far-flung operations.

The service began at 8:30 pm, but Jim (the name he prefers to be called rather than the Rev. Mr. Jones or Pastor Jones) arrived two hours late. The mood in the church when he arrived reminded me of the crowd at a United Farm Workers rally with Cesar Chavez in the San Joaquin valley. The electricity in the atmosphere was almost tangible. Every seat was taken and people were standing in the back and along the walls. The congregation was perhaps 75% black, with a median age well over 35. At the same time, however, all ages and races were well represented in the crowd of some 3,000 people.

Jones was expected to be somewhat late because he was giving the main address at a banquet for the Officers of Justice, a group of mostly minority San Francisco police officers. But he explained later that he was confronted on the way back to the church by a woman "who was talking suicide." So, Jones related, he took the time to counsel her while hundreds of people at the temple awaited his arrival by singing gospel songs and conducting an informal church business meeting. As he explained, he knew the people would "understand" the need for him to take time with the woman in the crisis situation. He was right: no one seemed at all put off by the late arrival of their pastor. People at the church seem to expect as much from him, in fact; it wreaks havoc on schedules and plans, but his constant questioning of the usual order of things seems part of the attraction of one of California's fastest-growing religious movements—in an age when most Protestant churches are declining.

Jim Jones founded Peoples Temple near Ukiah in Mendocino County in the middle-Sixties, bringing the message to San Francisco several years later and repeating the process in Los Angeles, where the church acquired a building for its services in late 1972. Today, Jones not only commutes weekly between the three churches, but as many as 200 members make the trek between the San Francisco and Los Angeles churches on alternate weeks using buses from the Temple's fleet of 13 converted Greyhounds.

Today, the sheer size and scope of the Peoples Temple operation is mind-boggling. Of the church's 20,000-plus members (attendance at a minimum of five church meetings is required before someone is admitted to membership), about 9,000 are in San Francisco, 10,000 in Los Angeles and 1,500 in Ukiah. In addition to the huge food program (volunteers obtain most of the food through donations from wholesalers and local merchants), these are some of the other Peoples Temple programs:

- A clinic in the San Francisco church, in which about 80 persons are seen each day by qualified nurses for general checkups or in special clinics, such as for sickle cell anemia or pap smears. Referrals are made to local doctors for more difficult cases.
- A physical therapy facility in San Francisco, for seniors and handicapped persons, with diothermy and whirlpool treatments for arthritic conditions.
- A drug rehabilitation program in San Francisco that claims to have "rehabilitated" 300 former drug addicts. The addicts withdraw from dope by the cold turkey method and are only considered "rehabilitated" after two full years without a relapse. Many of the addicts receive training in one of the Temple's vocational training programs in fields such as printing, electronics or auto repairs.
- A legal aid program in San Francisco where some 200 people a month come with serious legal, usually criminal problems.
- A 27,000-acre agricultural station that was begun two years ago by several dozen church members in a remote jungle region in the South American country of Guyana. The main crop is cassava, a root vegetable, though some 170 crops are now grown there, many of them experimental. About one-fourth of the church's annual budget of $600,000 is devoted to the project. Now there are about 100 church members working on the farm, all committed to spending at least several years there. Many of these were ghetto youths with long histories of social problems in America; Jones says many of these youths have been "rehabilitated."
- Four nursing homes for seniors in Mendocino County, each of which has from 10 to 25 elderly residents.

Jim Jones has made his share of enemies for his political stands, but no one accuses him of being a hypocrite.

and usually only about two hours of sleep a night. The night before I interviewed him for more than an hour at the church, Jones had been up all night counseling a couple, after the husband had tried to stab his wife with a knife. (On March 25 the Chronicle ran a page-two story about how Jones had collapsed from exhaustion after a Housing Authority meeting. He had not slept the previous night because he was counseling a suicidal drug addict going through withdrawal.)

What keeps him going? "Seeing human lives rehabilitated keeps me going," Jones replied. That's why he enjoys counseling so much and is willing to spend so much time at it. But at a deeper level, he asked, "Why should I complain about my life? There's nothing better to do with my life."

He acknowledged that he gets discouraged sometimes. But something seems to reinspire him, such as Laura Allende's visit last January. She is suffering from an advanced stage of cancer, yet continues to keep up a hard schedule of speeches about her native country. At the time of her visit, Jones said he was terribly exhausted and tired, but her visit was a "real shot in the arm" for him. "That's what keeps me going," he said. "I have seen sainted people, people that are living epistles. And I think Laura Allende is in that category. You see other people making sacrifices, as she is,' and you say to yourself, 'What less can I do?' "

In essence, Jones was expressing in our conversation the same philosophy he talked about in his sermon. It is a familiar philosophy to me, one that I remember hearing preached in the Methodist church I was brought up in and at the theological seminary I attended for a year.

It is not a philosophy everyone agrees with, and certainly not all Christians agree that this interpretation of Jesus's teachings is the most valid one. But what's significant is that Jones apparently tries to practice his version of Christianity so thoroughly. He has made his share of enemies for the political stands he has taken and has received more than his share of threats from local Nazis and other right-wingers. But no one accuses Jim Jones of being a hypocrite.

It is this quality about Jones that seems to attract people to follow him. Many members of the church I met with during the past month and a half told me that, above all else, it is Jones's constant personal attempts to square his actions with his beliefs that attracts them to him and to the community he is building.

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Peoples Temple: Where activist politics meets old-fashioned charity

Temple, the form of this sermon was unconventional. It was already past 11 pm by the time the songs, dances and two readings (the Declaration of Independence and "We Beg your Pardon, America," a scathing indictment of Ford's pardon of Nixon) were completed. Although people had already been in the hall for 2½ hours, nobody seemed interested in leaving. On the contrary, there was an air of excitement when Jones informally asked if there were any questions. At first I assumed this was some kind of audience-participation gimmick, but soon it became clear that this question-and-answer format was Jones's "sermon."

All the questions related to social issues: the Gary Gilmore execution, the Bakke suit on affirmative action college admission programs, crime in the streets. Jones's answers were similar in some ways to what might be expected from a liberal politician or an enlightened sociology professor. For instance, on capital punishment he said, "I think it's wrong for a society that wants to eliminate crime to kill people in such a brutal manner. It seems very wrong to help someone commit suicide." About Bakke: "Certainly something is owed the people who have spent 200 years being slaves and servants."

But his answers went beyond suggesting either a political solution to the issue or an interesting (and often radical) analysis of the problem. Jones emphasized the basic moral issues involved in the question, particularly as related to any injustice in the system, but invariably returned to his theme of the need for self-denying Christian love in approaching the problem.

Consider, for instance, his answer to a question asked by an older white woman: "What do you think is the number one problem with the American people today?" Jones immediately answered, "Apathy." Then, after thinking a moment longer, he added, "Everyone is worried about their own narcissistic problems."

Soon Jones warmed up to his main theme. He saw apathy as one of the major reasons why the CIA got away with giving money to support the despotic regimes in Iran and Chile and why the American criminal justice system punishes poor defendants severely and lets off the rich ones. At the same time, he saw signs of apathy in the rise of Nazism in this country and the possible rise of fascism as the economy gets worse.

He then personalized how he thinks people should fight against these injustices. "I am in this battle and I may be shot or put in jail," he said. Then he pointed out that many of this country's "working poor" are proceeding with materialistic illusions. But for Jones, "The way I keep myself straight is to live here in the Fillmore. I am at war with this system" that places greater values on material things than on human beings. He said he believed in the old cliche that "The love of money is the root of all evil." That is why, he said, he stays away from restaurants and luxurious surroundings. "I do not feel good about being in a restaurant when some people are not warm. The only thing I feel good about is work."

Does this mean he is acting out of guilt, he asked himself rhetorically? "I have a lot of guilt," was his response. "I have guilt to know my taxes have gone to the Shah of Iran and to Chile. Some people are not guilty at all about these things, and I sure do not want to end up like they are." As Jones concluded, most of the audience stood up and applauded and cheered.

Their response was indicative of the sort of charisma Jones conveys. He isn't a polished orator. His voice has a distinctive Midwestern preacher's twang to it. But he speaks with great intensity and conviction, and he is quite eloquent occasionally. But his magic with his own congregation seems to be two-fold; he speaks about the issues of political and economic injustice felt daily by the mostly poor and minority group, and they believe he practices what he preaches.

After Jones's sermon, a "seniors dance" was introduced, and more than a dozen older people, in their 60s, 70s, 80s and even 90s came up to the raised platform at the front of the church. They began to boogie to the jazz music played by a 66-year-old man at the piano. One 90-year-old man, who was almost completely blind, had to be helped from time to time to keep from tripping off the stage. Several younger people joined the old-timers, including a young white guy who looked like a vintage redneck. I must admit that this scene moved me deeply. During Jones's "sermon" I was writing in my notepad so furiously that I could not possibly get caught up in the emotion obviously shared by almost everyone else in the place. But seeing the old people dancing was too much. Where else in our society do old people get up to entertain younger people?

Peoples Temple's founder is as unusual and complex as the church is. Jones, who is part American Indian, was born 45 years ago into the desperate poverty of Depression-scarred rural Indiana. His father was a disabled war veteran who couldn't work, and Jones remembers how cold it often was in his family's unheated shack alongside a railroad track. He attended Indiana University and graduated from Butler University in Indianapolis with a teaching certificate, attended Cleveland Bible College and was ordained as a minister of the Disciples of Christ.

In addition to serving as a pastor of churches in and near Indianapolis, Jones was a nursing home director and a missionary in 1961 and 1962 in Brazil, where he established programs for orphans. When he left Indianapolis for California in 1965, he had a church and worked as executive secretary of the Indianapolis Mayor's Commission on Human Rights.

During his time in Indianapolis, Jones also made enemies, largely because of his strong pro-integration views and actions. For example, he once entered a hospital there with acute appendicitis but, when he discovered the hospital was segregated, he refused to be operated on until the place was integrated. So, the story goes, Jones remained there for two days until the integration was accomplished. But what particularly infuriated some segregationists was his adoption of a black orphan, Jim Jones, Jr. Jones and his wife Marceline received numerous threats, and he decided to leave Indiana for the safety of his family.

They settled in the Redwood Valley of Mendocino County, near Ukiah, in 1965. Remarkably, about 130 members of Jones's Indianapolis church followed him to California, apparently without any urging from Jones. Soon the group was holding church services in Jim's garage, the beginnings of Peoples Temple. Jones worked as a school teacher, commuting some 60 miles a day. Almost all of the 130 people who followed Jones west are still here, connected with the church in Ukiah, San Francisco or Los Angeles.

Jones is a short, somewhat overweight man with straight, well-combed black hair. He often wears a clerical collar under a somewhat seedy looking jacket, in keeping with his practice of acquiring only secondhand clothes.

Jones's eyes are often hidden behind a pair of light-sensitive glasses that darken when hit with light. Though an energetic and fundamentally healthy person, his eyes reveal fatigue, the result of a grueling work schedule

The Rev. Jim Jones (left) and some scenes inside his church in San Francisco's Fillmore district: the day care center, the free meal service and the medical clinic.

California's fastest-growing church feeds more people daily than St. Anthony's, sent 3,000 demonstrators to the I-Hotel and publishes the Bay Area's largest-circulation newspaper.

• A practice of giving away hundreds of dollars annually to organizations or individuals the church considers to be doing significant work. In the past year these have included contributions for medical research (the national associations for cancer, heart disease and sickle cell anemia); the Telegraph Hill Medical Clinic; SF Neighborhood Legal Assistance; the ACLU; the NAACP; the Freedom of Information Center; the Ecumenical Peace Institute; the Dennis Banks defense fund; the United Farm Workers.

Major decisions are normally reached through open church business meetings, of which members are notified either by mail or through an elaborate telephone tree. That's how, for instance, the congregation decided to demonstrate last September in Fresno in support of the four Fresno Bee reporters and editors who had refused to disclose their sources to a judge. More than 1,000 people demonstrated, in the middle of the week, on an around-the-clock basis for several days at a time when nobody else, with the exception of a few editorial writers, seemed concerned enough to act on the issue. But emergency decisions can be made by the church board of 50 members, chosen to represent every age, race and sex in the congregation.

The church's annual budget, $600,000 for all of its programs, is raised almost entirely through individual contributions of members. (For comparison purposes, the 315-member Old First Presbyterian Church of SF has an annual budget of $100,000—per capita, more than ten times Peoples Temple's.) The church receives no foundation or government grants to run any of its programs. Jones is paid about $20,000 a year, but this also covers his travel expenses and is shared with his family (he and his wife have adopted eight children of several races and have one son of their own). He lives in the Fillmore. In addition to Jones, there are only four paid staff members, all of whom receive subsistence pay and live in church-rented houses in the Fillmore. But there are hundreds of church members who donate most of their nonworking hours to do volunteer work with one program or another.

In this respect, Peoples Temple resembles a cause or a social movement more than a normal church. And the church service I saw, likewise, resembled a Civil Rights rally with Martin Luther King in the South during the early Sixties. Soon after Jones arrived, indeed, the congregation sang the old movement standards, "Oh Freedom" and "We Shall Overcome."

Jones's message is that people should subordinate their personal desires in the service of their fellow human being for the greater good of humanity.

Jones delivered this message throughout his "sermon" the evening I was there. Like everything else at Peoples